



OJIBWE DREAMCATCHER

Written by **Aaliyah Alberts**, ELac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, in collaboration with the Native Resonance Cohort sponsored by the Native American Indian Association and the Tennessee Arts Commission.



CONTENT SCOPE

Students will approach this activity with respect, openness, and a genuine desire to appreciate the deep spiritual and cultural significance of the dreamcatcher. Students will develop an appreciation for the dreamcatcher and the Ojibwe nation from which it comes. After learning the historical significance, students will create their own dreamcatcher to explore with mindfulness and appreciation for the rich cultural heritage that the dreamcatcher represents.

FOR TEACHERS

Subject & Topic: Social Studies (Native American History) and Art

Grade Level: K-12

Lesson Time: 1 Hour Class Period

Group Size: Regular Class Size (18 - 25 students)

MATERIALS

- Wooden hoop (Could be made out of a branch shaped to a round or teardrop shape)
- Sinew (Artificial sinew, hemp, or twine)
- Beads (Optional)
- Feathers (Optional)

OBJECTIVES

STUDENTS WILL:

- Learn the history of the dreamcatcher from traditional Ojibwe legends.
- Gain cultural knowledge and brief introduction of the Ojibwe Nation.
- Develop handmaking skills and create their own dreamcatcher.



WHO ARE THE OJIBWE

The Ojibwe people originally lived in the area around Lake Superior, covering what is now the northern United States (primarily Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan) and southern Canada (Ontario and Manitoba). Before European contact, the Ojibwe lived in semi-nomadic societies, moving with the seasons to fish, hunt, and gather food. They lived in family groups or bands, with a deeply rooted culture that emphasized harmony with nature, communal living, and the importance of oral traditions for passing down knowledge, history, and spiritual beliefs.

Most notably, they are known as the creators of the dreamcatcher. Dreamcatchers come from traditional Ojibwe stories. Aaliyah shares the story she was told as a young girl of the legend of the Dreamcatcher:

STORY OF THE DREAMCATCHER: THE SPIDERWOMAN

“The story is that of Spider woman, Asibikaashi, who protected the Ojibwe. When we were all together out east, Spider woman was able to easily watch over all of the Ojibwe children, but when we were dispersed and traveled west to find the food that grows on water (wildrice), mothers made spider charms for their children. They have since evolved into the dream catchers that we think of now, and have been adopted by many other Nations.”



RESPECTING AND HONORING THE DREAMCATCHER

The dreamcatcher we know today often has feathers hanging from the bottom. While they are not a part of the original stories, the feathers are known to help bring good dreams to you. The bad dreams get caught in the web, and the opening in the center allows the good dreams to come in. While dreamcatchers are specifically Ojibwe, many other Nations and non-Natives have adopted the dreamcatcher into their lives.

Dreams are very meaningful to the Ojibwe. They believe that in our dreams we are still living and ancestors and the Great Spirit bring messages to us through dreams. Additionally we believe that babies and elders are closest to the spirit world, hence the focus on spider charms/ dream catchers for children's cradles. It is crucial that when non-Natives make or purchase dreamcatchers, they recognize their spiritual significance and respect where they originate. They are magical and spiritual charms.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Begin the lesson with a brief overview of the Ojibwe nation. Highlight key historical points, including their forced removal, resilience, and how they have continued to thrive, particularly in the Great Lakes area. Introduce the activity explaining the dreamcatcher. Read Aaliyah's telling of the dreamcatcher legends delving into its significance. The teacher is encouraged to ask comprehension questions pertaining to the story to ensure student engagement. In connection with the stories, the teacher will lead discussion on cultural appropriation and the proper way to honor spiritually significant items. Upon understanding the significance dreamcatchers play in Ojibwe culture and history, students will replicate their own dreamcatcher following instructions.

ACTIVITY

In this activity, we'll reflect on the importance of intention and understanding in crafting a dream catcher, that it is not merely a craft project but an act of connecting with and honoring a centuries-old tradition.

- 1** Starting with a wooden hoop or tear drop shape (you can start with a branch and make the shape yourself, as well) tie a double knot with sinew starting at the top.
If you choose to create a hoop out of a branch, students will select a fresh branch that still has bend to it. Then by bending and loosening the branch, students will form a circle or teardrop shape.
- 2** Then going around the circle you will create little triangles by looping the sinew around the inside edge of the hoop. There should be 8 spots where the sinew loops connect to the ring, symbolizing the 8 spider legs.
- 3** Once you have your 8 knots around the hoop, connect the first knot you made to the last one with another loop.
- 4** Then you make more triangles around but tying the sinew them to the last row of triangles you just made, instead of tying them to the hoop. In these loops, people sometimes add beads to adorn them. Beads are not traditional but they add meaning depending on the person. (One bead to represent a spider, crystal beads to add more protection)
- 5** Keep making triangles all around the web until there is a new circle in the middle. Some people say the opening in the center of the dream catcher is where the good dreams come through.
- 6** Tie a knot to secure the sinew. Feathers can be added either in the center of the dream catcher or at the bottom.

EVALUATION

Evaluate students based on their engagement in discussions, the effort and creativity displayed in their dreamcatcher creation, and their understanding and respect for Ojibwe culture as reflected in their final piece and participation in class discussions. This lesson plan not only educates students about Ojibwe history and art but also encourages them to think critically about indigenous cultures and the importance of honoring and preserving such traditions.

- Given the spiritual significance attributed to dream catchers in protecting babies and elders, why do you think these groups are specifically mentioned?
- How can individuals, both Native and non-Native, show respect for the spiritual significance of dream catchers and other cultural artifacts?
- Why is it important to approach the making of dream catchers with the right intentions and a deep understanding of their spiritual significance?

